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ABSTRACT

This paper is part of a broader study considering effects of welfare reform on households in rural areas. This report describes the findings of qualitative research, which examined welfare reform implementation and availability of services in 12 rural communities in Alabama, Arkansas, California, and Maine. The study sites were diverse in terms of geographic isolation, unemployment rate, and racial composition. In each location, welfare staff, service providers, and community representatives were asked about implementation of work requirements, time limits, and other provisions of welfare reform; recipients' access to jobs and services; and the most serious barriers to implementation in rural areas. Employment opportunities varied greatly across sites, but all sites reported that most jobs obtained by welfare recipients paid the minimum wage and offered few possibilities of advancement. Education played an important role in determining a community's economic prospects and the potential for welfare recipients to attain self-sufficiency. Low education levels were a major barrier at seven sites, and at two of these, the quality of public schools was particularly poor. Community social capital--its capacity to assist its neediest citizens--was reflected in socially supportive attitudes in 10 communities. Although most communities were poor, the variation in their ability to provide a safety net for the poor was noteworthy. Promising practices were identified in the areas of education and training, transportation and accessibility, supportive services, and community involvement. An appendix presents site profiles. (SV)

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IMPLEMENTING WELFARE REFORM IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Nancy M. Pindus

February 2001

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Abstract

Implementing Welfare Reform in Rural Communities

Nancy M. Pindus

The paper is part of a broader study considering the effects of welfare reform on households in rural areas. A combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods was used to analyze the complexities in program rules, program implementation, and local economic factors, and their combined effects on welfare recipients in rural areas. This report describes the findings of our qualitative work, which examined welfare implementation and availability of services in 12 rural communities. We examine service availability; economic, demographic, and social factors; and welfare policies that might affect rural areas differently.

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Implementing Welfare Reform in Rural Communities

I. Introduction

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant. PRWORA changed the nation's welfare system from an entitlement program for income-eligible families to a program that provides time-limited assistance and requires recipients to participate in work-focused activities. PRWORA granted states broad flexibility to tailor their TANF programs with respect to exemptions, sanctions, and required activities. In considering these three key aspects of PRWORA—work requirements, time-limited benefits, and state flexibility—questions arise about the implementation of welfare reform and the variations in policies and practices between states and within states. One geographic dimension potentially important in the welfare implementation process concerns the dispersion of the population. This paper asks: how did areas with sparse populations, mostly rural areas, respond to the welfare changes introduced with PRWORA? The paper is part of a broader study considering the effects of welfare reform on households in rural areas. A combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods was used to analyze the complexities in program rules, program implementation, and local economic factors, and their combined effects on welfare recipients in rural areas.[1] This report describes the findings of our qualitative work that examined welfare implementation and availability of services in 12 rural communities.

Expectations about Welfare Reform in Rural Areas

We came to this study with the expectation that welfare reform would work out differently in rural areas than in urban areas. The literature on rural poverty indicates that rural welfare families may be more vulnerable than their urban counterparts due to the work focus and time-limited nature of TANF. Vulnerability may be greater in rural areas because there are fewer work opportunities, greater barriers to obtaining employment, and fewer options available to replace welfare. Early evidence indicates that, in the time since welfare reform, caseload levels, unemployment rates for the working age poor, and child poverty rates have all declined, but that rural areas are faring worse than urban or suburban areas (Bosley and Mills 1999, Rural Policy Research Institute 1999). In fact, although both rural and urban unemployment rates declined each year since 1992, the rural-urban gap increased, with unemployment falling more slowly in rural than in urban areas (Economic Research Service 2000).

The rural poor are more geographically dispersed than the urban poor, making it more difficult for rural residents to access social services that can assist them in finding work or supports needed to remain employed (Rural Policy Research Institute 1999). Social service agencies are often located in county seats or other population centers that can be difficult for clients in

[1] See Lerman, Duke, and Valente 1999, "Do Income Support Levels and Work Incentives Differ Between Rural and Urban Areas?" and Mckernan, Lerman, Pindus, and Valente 2000, "The Relationship between Metropolitan and Non-Metropolitan Locations, Changing Welfare Policies, and the Employment of Single Mothers."

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outlying areas to access, and the agencies are usually too poorly funded to provide active outreach (Deavers, Hoppe, and Ross 1986 and Burt 1996). In their study of rural-urban differences in welfare reform in Iowa communities, Fletcher et al. (2000) found that the most important difference between rural and urban communities was that urban areas had greater access to jobs and support services, especially job training and education, health care, child care, and emergency services.

Given the accessibility barriers and the higher unemployment in rural areas, welfare policy changes may place greater hardships on rural welfare recipients. For example, vehicle exemptions may impose greater restrictions on rural residents because reliable automobiles are more important for the longer commutes to work and because public transportation is more limited in rural areas. The lack of public transportation or reliable private transportation acts as a disincentive to employment, or may restrict individuals to low-paying jobs close to home. To the extent that finding employment in some rural areas may take longer than in urban areas, rural clients are more likely to lose benefits by exceeding time limits. Clients may meet work activity requirements in areas of limited employment opportunities by taking part-time jobs, working in community service positions, or undertaking job training. However, while these activities often lead to full-time employment, such transitions may be more difficult in rural areas.

On the other hand, quantitative analyses conducted as part of this study, as well as recently completed work by other researchers, indicates that the dynamics of employment, earnings, and welfare may not conform to our negative expectations about rural areas. Lerman, Duke, and Valente (1999) find slightly higher financial incentives to work in rural areas than in urban areas. Since average incomes are lower in rural than in urban areas, and since the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and food stamps are the same throughout the country, families relying on earnings plus federal benefits achieve higher relative incomes in rural than in urban areas. McKernan et al. (2000) find that welfare reform is playing a major role in raising the employment rates of single mothers, and the gains are approximately as high in rural as in urban areas. Connelly (2000) finds that early work-related welfare reform waivers appear to have had a less detrimental effect on the earnings of rural than on urban recipients. Additionally, McConnell and Ohls (2000) report that rural Food Stamp Program (FSP) households are more likely than urban households to receive income from the employment of a household member (29 percent of rural FSP households receive earned income compared with 25 percent of urban households). Thus, it appears that the pattern of geographic differences in response to welfare reform is complex.

The purpose of this paper is to learn more about welfare reform implementation in rural areas by drawing on the perspective of people operating the programs. In listening to welfare staff, service providers, and community representatives in 12 locations in four states, we focused on several key questions:

- How are rural welfare offices implementing the work requirements, time limits, and other provisions of welfare reform?
- Is access to jobs and services so limited as to prevent most recipients from adapting to the new rules?

- What are the most serious barriers to implementing welfare reform in rural areas?

The next section presents the methodology used to elicit and understand the responses of local officials to these and related questions. Section III presents our main findings concerning the themes that emerged in our interviews and analysis about welfare changes in selected rural settings. In Section IV, we describe promising practices developed at the local level to cope with the challenges of implementing welfare reform. We conclude in Section V by highlighting selected implications for policy.

II. Methodology and Site Profiles

Site visits can capture the diversity of rural areas with respect to population demographics and employment, as well as local variations in implementation of policies and availability of community resources. The conflicting evidence to date—that recipients in rural areas face especially high barriers to obtaining and keeping jobs, but that employment incentives and employment rates are higher among rural welfare recipients—perhaps results from the fact that national data do not capture very well the great diversity of rural areas.

Most data available for research are county-based and use the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) definition of metro and non-metro. The OMB defines counties located inside a metropolitan area as "metropolitan" counties, and counties outside a metropolitan area are considered "non-metropolitan" or "rural."[2] This county-based definition has limitations. Metropolitan counties can include a large "rural" population, and "non-metro" counties can include a large "urban" population. Also, many smaller urban areas are outside of metro areas. Furthermore, this definition does not reflect diversity within the county, especially for counties that cover larger geographic areas. While a number of other measures have been developed for classifying urban and rural areas,[3] most studies that use the major national databases for analysis, such as the Current Population Survey and the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), are limited to the county-based classification of metro and non-metro areas. Our selection of sites, discussed in the following section, considered the limitations of the metro/non-metro definition and the variations that exist within the non-metro category.

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[2] A Metropolitan Area contains: at least one central city with either a place with a minimum population of 50,000 *or* a census defined urbanized area and a total Metropolitan Area population of at least 100,000 (75,000 in New England). It may also include one or more outlying counties that have close economic and social relationships with the central county. The outlying counties must have a specified level of commuting to the central counties and also must meet certain standards such as population density, urban population, and population growth.

[3] For example, the Economic Research Service (ERS) has developed ways of further categorizing counties. Rural-urban continuum codes categorize counties by their degree of urbanization and proximity to a metro area. Urban Influence Codes classify all US counties into nine categories based on the size of the MSA in the case of metro counties, and adjacency to MSAs and size of largest city in the case of non-metro counties. The Census defines an area as urban if it comprises places of 2,500 or more persons in cities, villages, boroughs, or towns; *or* in census designated places of 2,500 or more; *or* in other territory, incorporated or unincorporated, included in urbanized areas. Rural is divided into "places of less than 2,500" and "not in places" (outside incorporated and unincorporated places and the rural portions of extended cities). Census further divides rural population into "rural farm" and "rural nonfarm."

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Site Selection and Data Collection

We conducted site visits or a series of in-depth telephone interviews in 12 localities[4] in four states to examine the differences in the implementation of program rules and local conditions that shape program operations. To select sites with variations in economic, geographic, demographic, and policy factors, we considered the TANF benefit level, the unemployment rate, the percentage of families in poverty, the number of TANF recipients, the AFDC/TANF caseload change between 1993 and 1998, the percentage of the state's population that is foreign born, and transfer payments as a percentage of total personal income. In addition, we took account of the overall tone of the state's TANF policy, ranging from lenient to strict, with respect to work activity requirements, sanctions, time limits, and exemptions.

The states selected were Alabama, Arkansas, California, and Maine. We intentionally oversampled the south, because the majority of the rural TANF and Food Stamp recipients live there. We included states from two other regions to explore the differences and similarities between benefit receipt in the south and other areas of the country (see Table 1).

We selected two to four counties in each state for site visits. The 12 local sites provide variation across key dimensions that are important for the study. The sites include counties that are adjacent to large metropolitan areas and counties that are much more isolated. Unemployment rates in the selected counties ranged from 5.1 percent to 25.7 percent in 1998. The counties also rely on a range of industries for their income: farming, government, services, and manufacturing. Four of the selected counties have an African-American population of more than 40 percent; in two of the counties, Hispanics make up a substantial proportion of the population. These counties represent the diversity of rural America (see Table 2). Appendix A provides brief profiles of each of the sites.

Each of the two-day site visits included interviews with the county welfare director; supervisors of welfare, food stamps, and work-related programs for welfare recipients; caseworkers; and eligibility workers. In addition to welfare office staff, site visit respondents included employment and training service providers, child care referral agency staff, emergency service providers (e.g., food banks, shelters); and providers of other supportive services (e.g., substance abuse treatment, mental health services, transportation). In addition, if local coalitions were working on welfare reform, we met with their community representatives. Key topics addressed in our interviews were: an overview of local human services agency operations, local context, population served, TANF Program policies and implementation, caseworker perspectives on TANF, and availability of resources and services. Discussions about local context included the local economy, demographics, major employers, commuting patterns, and community attitudes towards welfare and welfare reform. We asked caseworkers to describe client flow, intake/enrollment procedures, time limit rules, and the conciliation and sanctioning process. Our site visits also probed for information on the availability of and access to pre-employment and employment services (e.g., job readiness classes, resume preparation, job search assistance, employment counseling, etc.) special services for "hard-to-serve" clients (e.g., substance abuse and mental health treatment, shelters, etc.), child care, transportation, post-employment services, and transitional benefits.

[4] Site visits were conducted in 10 localities. In two additional localities, telephone interviews with key informants were conducted in lieu of site visits.

TABLE 1 – CHARACTERISTICS OF STATES SELECTED FOR CASE STUDIES

	Maine	Arkansas	Alabama	California
Region	East	South	South	West
Population Distribution (1997)[1]	39.9/44.1/16	48.5/21.1/30.4	67.7/24.8/7.5	67.9/19.6/0.7
Percent Foreign-Born Population (1996)[2]	2.3%	1.8%	1.4%	25.5%
Racial Composition (White non-Hispanic, White Hispanic, Black, Other; 1997)	97.7/0.6/0.5/1.3	81.1/1.6/16.1/1.2	72.3/0.8/25.9/1.0	51.1/28.8/7.4/12.7
Transfer Payments as a % of Total Personal Income (1997)	20.6	21.1	20.5	15.1
TANF Recipients (12/98)	36,870	30,606	49,461	1,850,898
Non-Metro Unemployment (1998)	3.2-9.4	3.6-11.9	3.4-13.1	5.5-25.7
Percent People in Poverty (1995-1997, three-year average)	10.9	17.2	16.6	16.7
AFDC Caseload Change 1993-98	-46%	-59%	-65%	-23%
TANF Benefit (1999)	$418	$204	$164	$565
TANF Work Requirement	24 months	1 month	Immediately	Immediately
First Sanction for Non-Compliance with TANF Work Requirement	Removal of adult	Termination of benefit	25% reduction in benefit[3]	Removal of adult
TANF Vehicle Limit	One vehicle	One vehicle	One vehicle	$4,650
TANF Lifetime Time Limit	60 months	24 months	60 months	60 months
TANF Diversion Policy	Up to 3 months	Up to 3 months	None	Yes-county based
Existence of General Assistance program[4]	Yes	No	No	Yes
Comparable Disqualification for Food Stamps[5]	Yes	No	No	Yes

[1] Percentage of state population residing in Metro/Non-Metro adjacent/Non-Metro not adjacent counties.
[2] Urban Institute tabulations of the Current Population Survey, using a three-year average of March 1995 to March 1997 where 1996 is the center year. Estimates for all states except California are less reliable because of small sample sizes (fewer than 150 unweighted cases across the three years).
[3] If the client fails to comply after three months, the benefit is terminated for at least one month.
[4] Description of General Assistance (GA) programs:
Maine GA serves a cross-section of low-income people. Benefit schedule based on local housing costs. Work requirement.
California GA primarily serves able-bodied adults without dependents. Benefits and eligibility determined by counties.
[5] Comparable Disqualification: Requirements of Other Means-Tested Programs for Which Violation Results in Comparable Food Stamp Disqualification
California: Work Requirement, General Assistance Work Requirement
Maine: Work Requirement, Non-Work Related Classes, Requirement Specific to Minor Parents, General Assistance Work Requirement, altering a voucher or lying.

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TABLE 2 – CHARACTERISTICS OF CASE STUDY SITES, BY STATE

				Estimates of county population by race and Hispanic origin: July 1, 1997						
Area Name	07/01/1998 Population Estimate	1998 Unemploy-ment Rate	Poverty Rate For All Ages In 1995	White Hispanic	White non-Hispanic	Black	American Indian, Asian, and Pacific Islander	TANF Cases/ Adults	Continuum Code	Principal Industry
ALABAMA STATE TOTAL	4,351,999	4.2	17.6	0.8	72.3	25.9	0.4	N/A	N/A	N/A
ALABAMA NON-METRO[1]	1,013,529	6.2	21	0.4	73.5	25.5	0.6	N/A	N/A	N/A
Sumter County[2]	15,766	9.3	35.9	0.2	27.8	71.8	0.0	292/170	7	Gov't/Services
Barbour County[3] *(Adjacent to Columbus, GA)*	26,895	4.7	24.9	0.5	52.5	46.7	0.2	210/85	6	Manufacturing
Lowndes County[4] *(Adjacent to Montgomery MSA)*	12,984	10.8	35	0.1	24.1	75.7	0.1	140/67	8	Manuf/Services
ARKANSAS STATE TOTAL	2,538,303	5.5	18.2	1.6	81.1	16.1	1.2	N/A	N/A	N/A
ARKANSAS NON-METRO[1]	1,005,817	7	21.8	1.3	81.7	16.3	0.7	N/A	N/A	N/A
Desha County[2]	15,110	9.6	30.9	1.4	52.6	45.5	0.5	334/179	7	Farm
Conway County[3] *(Adjacent to Little Rock MSA)*	19,920	5.4	17.9	1.1	81.7	16.6	0.5	128/71	6	Manufacturing
Pike County[5]	10,592	5.1	17.5	1.0	94.1	4.2	0.7	38/37	9	Farming
CALIFORNIA STATE TOTAL	32,666,550	5.9%	16.5%	28.8	51.1	7.4	12.7	N/A	N/A	N/A
ALL COUNTIES WITH METRO AREAS OF LESS THAN 1 MILLION	5,580,146	11.3%	19.6%	28.9	58.7	3.8	8.5	N/A	N/A	N/A
Imperial County[6] *(Geographically Large County Adjacent to the San Diego MSA)*	144,051	25.7%	31.0%	70.9	22.5	2.6	1.6	4,039/3,215	4	Gov't/Farming
Madera County[7] *(Adjacent to Fresno MSA)*	114,748	12.8%	20.8%	40.5	52.5	3.3	1.9	2,774/1,817	2	Services/Farming
Tehama County[8] *(Adjacent to Redding and Chico, CA)*	54,073	8.7%	18.5%	13.0	83.1	0.6	2.3	1,288/900	6	Services
Nevada County[9] *(Eastern Edge adjacent to Reno NV)*	91,334	5.5%	9.4%	5.5	92.0	0.2	2.3	813/483	4	Services
MAINE STATE TOTAL	1,244,250	4.4	12.3	0.6	97.7	0.5	1.2	N/A	N/A	N/A
MAINE NON-METRO[1]	379,777	5.6	14.3	0.5	98.2	0.2	1.0	N/A	N/A	N/A
Somerset County[2]	52,380	7.4	16.8	0.4	98.8	0.2	0.3	—	7	Manufacturing
Oxford County[8] *(Adjacent to Portland MSA)*	53,673	6.0	14.1	0.4	98.9	0.2	0.5	—	6	Services

1 Non-Metro figures computed for counties of continuum codes 6 or higher
2 Non-adjacent county with an urban population of 2,500-19,999 in poor economic condition
3 Adjacent county with an urban population of 2,500-19,999 in better economic condition
4 Adjacent county with an urban population of less than 2,500
5 Non-adjacent county with an urban population of less than 2,500
6 More isolated county with an urban population of 20,000 or more in poor economic condition
7 Adjacent county in a Metro Area of 250,000 to 1 million population
8 Adjacent County with an Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999
9 Adjacent county with an urban population of 20,000 or more in better economic condition

Source for Population Data: http://www.census.gov/population/estimates/county/co-98-1/98C1_01.txt
Source for Unemployment Rates: http://www.state.me.us/labor/lmis/reports/edrg/mecty98.html
Source for Poverty Rates: http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/dataman/state
Source for Race Data: http://www.census.gov/population/estimates/county/crh/crhal97.txt
Unable to get TANF caseload data from Maine
Source for Principal Industry Data: Bureau of Economic Analysis, "Bearfacts"

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III. Findings/Themes

Our field research explores the context of welfare reform in rural settings. We examine service availability; economic, demographic, and social factors; and welfare policies that might affect rural areas differently. Our research confirms, first, that no single picture captures "rural America." The communities we visited varied greatly, but some themes were common across most of the sites. In light of extensive field work in metro areas conducted as part of the Urban Institute project, *Assessing the New Federalism*,[5] we find that many of the issues faced by these rural communities are similar to those faced by any poor community trying to serve its neediest citizens. Nevertheless, remote locations, sparse population, and limited economic development do appear to exacerbate the problems of the poorest rural communities visited.

Economic, Demographic, and Social Factors

Striking differences emerge across the sites with respect to economic, demographic, and social factors. These differences are beyond the descriptive capabilities of readily available demographic and economic statistics. The data from official sources did not always reflect what we saw on our site visits. The classification of agricultural counties provides a good example. Of the sites in our study, farming was identified as the principal industry in two of the Arkansas counties and two of the California counties, but in none of the Alabama counties. Yet, respondents in Lowndes County, Alabama, indicated that the agriculture industry was the largest source of employment in the area. In Desha County, Arkansas, local residents pointed out that the county's agricultural base does not offer much employment for welfare recipients because most farms are small and family-owned, employing few additional workers. Although Imperial County, California, is a large agricultural region, few welfare recipients are employed in agriculture. Agricultural workers are eligible for unemployment insurance in California, and they turn to this system rather than welfare when agricultural work is limited.

Unemployment statistics are another example of how local site visits added an important dimension to our understanding of economic conditions. Imperial County had the highest unemployment rate of the sites visited, yet respondents explained that the official unemployment rate does not accurately reflect local economic conditions or the availability of non-agricultural jobs. Those employed in agriculture frequently work only part of the year and apply for unemployment insurance for the other months. One respondent pointed out that seasonality is common in agricultural areas, and that residents consider supporting unemployed farmworkers in the off-season to be a public responsibility.

The most frequently mentioned (10 of 12 sites) source of employment opportunities for welfare recipients was factory work, primarily in small manufacturing or food processing plants (Table 3). Service industry jobs, including restaurants, supermarkets, convenience stores, and nursing homes were other major sources of employment for welfare recipients in eight of the 12 sites. In five sites, agriculture was a major source of employment; those in four sites reported that

[5] See for example, Clark et al. 1998. *Income Support and Social Services for Low Income People in Alabama*; Geen et al. 1998. *Income Support and Social Services for Low Income People in California*; Pindus et al. 1997. *Income Support and Social Services for Low Income People in Texas.*

government (usually local government such as county schools, social services offices, and health centers) was a major employer. Reports from all sites indicated that most jobs obtained by welfare recipients paid the minimum wage and that few jobs offer opportunities for advancement.

TABLE 3 - SOURCES OF EMPLOYMENT FOR WELFARE RECIPIENTS*

Site	Services	Factories	Agriculture	Government
Sumter, AL		✓		✓
Lowndes, AL		✓	✓	
Barbour, AL	✓	✓		
Desha, AR	✓	✓		
Conway, AR	✓	✓		
Pike, AR	✓			✓
Nevada, CA		✓		✓
Tehama, CA	✓	✓	✓	
Madera, CA	✓	✓	✓	
Imperial, CA			✓	✓
Oxford, ME	✓	✓		
Somerset, ME	✓	✓	✓	

* Based on site visit interviews, the two-three most often mentioned sources of employment in each site.

Education played an important role in determining a community's economic prospects and the potential for its public assistance recipients to attain self-sufficiency. Staff in 7 of the 12 counties in the study (including all of the counties visited in Alabama) noted that low education levels were a major barrier to employment for TANF participants. In two of these counties, one in Alabama and one in Arkansas, the poor quality of local public schools was apparently a particular problem, not only resulting in employment barriers for individual clients, but also impeding economic development. These counties have been unable to attract new businesses to their communities because of the low skill levels of potential workers and the reluctance of families already employed by these businesses to relocate to a community with poor quality public schools. In one county, low literacy levels prevented many TANF clients from obtaining drivers' licenses. In only one county, Somerset, Maine, did staff report having trouble identifying eligible Welfare-to-Work[6] participants because they served so few high school dropouts.

A community's "social capital"—the capacity of institutions and individuals to assist clients in finding training or employment and provide help for its neediest citizens—depends on its socioeconomic profile and social organizations. To examine social capital, we addressed community attitudes towards welfare recipients and welfare reform, community-based support of the poor, and cooperation between public agencies and the private sector. Overall, community attitudes towards assisting welfare recipients were very positive. Individuals in only two of the twelve communities reported negative community attitudes towards welfare. People in one

[6] The Welfare-to-Work (WtW) Grants Program, authorized under the Budget Reconciliation Act of 1997, provides states and localities with supplemental funds to help those welfare recipients, and non-custodial parents of children on welfare, with the most serious employment problems move into jobs that have some potential for upward mobility. One of the criteria for eligibility is the lack of a high school diploma. The program is administered through local workforce development agencies. The first grants were awarded in January 1998.

community indicated that a segment of the population believed that "public assistance should not be offered at all." Even in that county, respondents noted that attitudes have improved and that welfare opponents now represent a minority opinion in the community. The second community that was noticeably "not welcoming" to low-income individuals is unique among the counties we studied because it has become a popular destination for affluent retirees and has experienced rapid growth since the 1980s. According to one respondent, 75 percent of the county's population has moved there in the past 20 years.

In contrast, informants in ten communities reported positive community responses to welfare reform and a supportive attitude toward individuals in need. Respondents in three of these communities specifically noted that the small size of their communities was a contributing factor to this sympathetic approach. For example, in one site, a person said that caseworkers "are really concerned about their clients because caseworkers and clients are from the same town." A respondent in another site noted that the general attitude of the community, which had recently experienced plant closings, is that "anyone can fall on hard times." At another site, staff reported extensive community input and cooperation concerning welfare reform implementation because "everyone knows everyone." These comments are consistent with expectations that rural communities would be more supportive because public assistance recipients are less anonymous. Comments in several sites dealt with the individual attention that workers are able to provide to clients in small offices. For example, welfare agency staff in sites visited in Alabama and Arkansas drive clients to job readiness classes and job interviews when needed. Sites in Arkansas, California, and Maine noted that local employers were receptive to hiring welfare recipients.

Since most of the communities we visited were poor—as evidenced by poverty and unemployment rates higher than the average for their respective states—the variation in local capacity and resources to provide a safety net for the poor was noteworthy. While all of the sites visited had some community-based supports organized to serve low-income families, some communities clearly had more resources, both organizational and financial, than others. For example, food banks in Oxford County, Maine, and Desha County, Arkansas, limit the frequency with which a family can access the food bank (once every two months in Oxford and once every four months in Desha), while Somerset County, Maine, has a food bank in nearly every substantial community in the county; and the food bank in Skowhegan (location of the Somerset County TANF office) reports that it generally does not have to turn people away. The welfare office in Pike County, Arkansas, has a small emergency fund that is used to provide vouchers for food, utility bills, and disaster relief, but staff report that sometimes a lack of funds limits their ability to assist clients with emergencies. In contrast, Conway County, Arkansas, has been able to supplement its emergency funds with church, community and private donations and approves between $6,000 and $10,000 in vouchers per month. The vouchers are administered by the welfare agency according to guidelines established by the Conway County Care Center, a joint project of the local Ministerial Alliance and the county Department of Human Services. We found that community attitudes, proximity to more prosperous communities, or the presence of even one corporation, philanthropic foundation, or socially active congregation can make an important difference in a community's capacity to provide a safety net for its poorest residents.

Service Availability

We analyzed site visit data to identify whether a wide range of services were either available in the county[7] or provided to county residents on an itinerant basis.[8] Table 4 summarizes our findings across the sites visited. Certain services were more broadly available than others. TANF-related services, such as eligibility services for TANF, Food Stamps, and Medicaid, were available in almost all counties, although, in a few cases, services were only available on an itinerant basis. Other services that were available in most counties were high school equivalency (GED) classes (available in all counties), basic emergency assistance from community-based organizations (available in all counties), and licensed child care (available in 11 of the 12 counties). The services that were least available in these rural communities were public transportation, workforce development services, shelters, rehabilitative services, and 24-hour child care (an issue in some rural counties, where shift work is common). A job training agency or one-stop career center was located in just half of the counties visited and an employment service (ES) office was located in five of the counties and available to three other counties on an itinerant basis. Vocational Rehabilitation services were the most likely to be provided on an itinerant basis. With respect to basic supports needed for work, only four counties had any form of public transportation, and just three counties had clothing banks where clients could obtain clothing appropriate for the workplace.

In examining service availability by location and by state, we found, contrary to our expectations, that counties not adjacent to metropolitan areas were as likely to have most services available in their counties as were counties adjacent to metropolitan areas. The exceptions were job training agencies/one-stops, clothing banks, and emergency shelters, which were more available in adjacent counties. Job training agencies were located in four of the seven adjacent counties and in two of the five nonadjacent counties; access to a job training agency was available only some of the time in one additional nonadjacent county. The three counties that had clothing banks were all adjacent to metropolitan areas. Six of the seven adjacent counties had some type of emergency shelter facility, while only one of the nonadjacent counties had an emergency shelter. Two services, Employment Service (ES) offices and community or technical colleges, appeared to be more available in nonadjacent counties. ES offices were located in two adjacent counties and available on a rotating basis in two others; in contrast, they were located in three of the five nonadjacent counties and sometimes available in a fourth county. Community or technical colleges were located in three of seven adjacent counties and in four of five nonadjacent counties. Perhaps the proximity to metropolitan areas, which have all of these services, results in fewer employment and training institutions being located in adjacent counties.

[7] In cases where the service was located in another county, but was within 10 miles of the focus community, the service was coded as "in the county."

[8] In many rural areas services are provided by workers from another county or a regional office who visit the rural county on a regular schedule (e.g., once per week).

TABLE 4 - SERVICE AVAILABILITY IN 12 RURAL COUNTIES

	In County	Itinerant
TANF-related services		
TANF/ES office	11	1
Medicaid application office	10	1
JOBS/TANF employment services	11	1
Welfare coalition/steering committee	11	
Employment-related services		
Job training agency/one-stop career center	6	1
Employment Service office	5	3
Training programs-private	8	
Educational resources		
GED classes	12	
Community or technical college	7	
College or university	2	
Safety net/emergency services		
Food bank/pantry	10	
Emergency assistance (e.g., help with electric bills, etc.)	12	
Emergency shelter	6	
Other Supportive Services		
Licensed day care center(s)	11	
24-hour child care	3	
Substance abuse treatment	8	
Mental health services	12	
Domestic violence counseling	5	
Vocational Rehabilitation	1	8
Public transportation	4	
Clothing bank/closet	3	

Source: Urban Institute site visits to 12 rural counties, 1999-2000

Service availability in rural communities varied by state, indicating that state policies and state spending priorities may influence the location and availability of services. All of the rural counties visited in California had public transportation systems—and, they were the only rural counties in our study to have public transportation. Maine was the only state to provide welfare-related services to some rural counties on an itinerant basis. The rural counties we studied in Maine and Alabama did not have job training agencies or one-stop career centers. Each of the four California counties we visited had at least one type of emergency shelter (e.g., for families, for single males, or for victims of domestic violence). In comparison, one of the counties in Alabama, one county in Arkansas, and neither of the two counties in Maine had such facilities.

Policies That May Affect Rural Areas Differently, and Their Implementation

State policies shape the context of TANF programs. We considered a variety of policy factors in selecting the four study states, including those that would reflect the overall tone of the TANF

policy, ranging from lenient to strict. Both Maine's and California's benefit levels are above the national average of $390 and Alabama's and Arkansas's benefits are considerably below the average. Alabama, Arkansas, and California require job-ready TANF recipients to look for work immediately or within one month of initial receipt of benefits, while Maine adopted the federal time line, allowing TANF recipients 24 months of benefits prior to requiring them to look for work (see Table 1). In the spring of 1999, when sites were selected for this study, Arkansas's sanction policy—the termination of cash benefits for non-compliance with work activities—was one of the strictest policies in the country. However, in July 1999, at the time of our first site visit, Arkansas changed its full family sanction policy to a 25 percent reduction in the cash benefit. Alabama's 25 percent sanction of the benefit for the first instance of non-compliance gains teeth after the third month of non-compliance, when the benefit is terminated. Maine and California remove the parent's needs from the benefit until the parent complies with the requirement. This policy allows the children's portion of the grant to continue even after noncompliance with work requirements.

Maine, Arkansas, and Alabama have generous vehicle exemption limits, exempting from $10,000 of the value of a car to the full value of one car; California's vehicle exemption limit mirrors the limit in the Food Stamp Program, $4,650. Arkansas adopted short lifetime limits on benefit receipt, allowing 24 months. In comparison, Maine, Alabama, and California allow clients 60 months of benefits before ending assistance (and California will continue assistance for children after 60 months). Maine and California have broad-based General Assistance programs that serve a cross-section of low-income people. Maine's General Assistance program features voucher/vendor payments and is geared toward specific needs, such as covering one month's rent or emergency food needs. Counties in Maine have great discretion in determining who receives General Assistance benefits. California's General Assistance program is more standardized than Maine's and offers monthly cash benefits rather than vouchers. Of the states in this study, only California has a statewide group that specifically addresses welfare reform issues for rural areas. California's County Welfare Director's Association has a rural subgroup that meets monthly. Respondents in two California counties commented that they found this group to be helpful.

Alabama, Arkansas, and Maine have state-administered TANF programs, while California has devolved a great deal of responsibility for the design and administration of its TANF program to the counties. Our site visits considered the question of whether work requirements, time-limited benefits, and state flexibility posed special challenges in rural areas. We explored whether, and how, implementation of welfare reform was adapted to rural communities within the context of varying state policies.

Work Requirements. Almost all of the sites in the study followed a work-first approach, including mandatory job search. Although Maine's state policy appears more lenient than the other states in the study with respect to work requirements, the two local sites visited in Maine had a clear work-first orientation. In Somerset County, Maine, where job opportunities are limited, the TANF Program maintains its work-first orientation, requiring community service or other approved work activity if a client can't find a job.

The two exceptions to the strong work-first approach were Pike County, Arkansas and Imperial County, California. Respondents in Pike County observed a change in emphasis from work-first

at the start of welfare reform to an increased focus on education by late 1999. Imperial County, which has a high unemployment rate and a large number of monolingual Spanish-speaking participants in its TANF caseload, opted to start at the minimum 20 hours per week required work activity participation (which was later increased to 32 hours). The choice to start at the lower work participation requirement was possible because California permits considerable county-level flexibility in TANF implementation. Imperial County is actively trying to develop the skills of TANF clients for entry into the labor market. As clients approach the five-year time limit, they move from English immersion classes to short-term skills classes or work experience, if they have not found a job.

Even in state-administered programs, there is county level discretion in determining exemptions from work requirements. State policy in Alabama permits temporary deferral from employment activities for emergency situations out of the client's control such as illness, transportation breakdown, domestic violence, substance abuse treatment, and/or living in a remote area. In two rural Alabama counties visited, JOBS caseworkers reported that 20 to 30 percent of their caseloads had deferrals. Problems with child care and transportation are common reasons for deferrals of clients living in remote rural areas. Clients are permitted to defer their work activities if their commute is in excess of two hours per day including dropping off or picking up children from child care. In Sumter County, Alabama, not having transportation or child care is considered good cause for leaving a job. Sites in the other states visited also reported accommodations for clients with transportation or child care difficulties. Caseworkers in Pike County, Arkansas will reduce the number of job contacts required per week in applicant job search if transportation is a problem. In Tehama County, California, clients who live more than one mile from public transportation and don't have their own transportation are not required to participate in work activities. In Oxford County, Maine caseworkers frequently grant exemptions from work requirements due to transportation and/or child care problems.

Although the sites in the study had a strong work orientation for TANF clients, work requirements for food stamp recipients were waived in half of the sites in the study.[9] Six of the twelve sites in the study had food stamp work requirement waivers in place at the time of our interviews (although one waiver was about to expire), and two other counties in our study had previously had waivers. All of the waivers were due to high unemployment rates. In practice, the existence of these waivers meant that food stamp recipients received little in the way of work-related services such as job readiness classes or job search assistance.

Sanctions. Within the rules set out by states and the overall guidance provided to counties on imposing sanctions, caseworkers and local TANF administrators exercise considerable judgment in implementing sanction policy. County officials, and often individual caseworkers, play important roles in preventing sanctions through communicating with the client and determining "good cause" for noncompliance rather than imposing a sanction. Across all of the sites, caseworkers generally favored a strong sanction policy as a way to provide some leverage for encouraging a client to comply, but did not impose sanctions without first trying to discuss the issue with the client. In Arkansas, the change from a full family sanction to a 25 percent reduction in the cash benefit was met with mixed reactions by caseworkers. Many caseworkers

[9] States are permitted to request waivers from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to exempt able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) from time limits and work requirements in those geographic areas that meet waiver criteria because they lack a sufficient number of available jobs for ABAWDs.

expressed the opinion that, since they worked with clients to avoid a sanction (e.g., "sanctions are a last resort"), the new sanction policy was too lenient, as it only applied to those who had resisted repeated efforts on the part of the caseworker to encourage compliance.

In Maine, the philosophy from the state level is that staff should work with clients to bring them into compliance. Nevertheless, in the two sites visited, sanctions are stressed by the caseworkers. One respondent reported that more than half of the clients comply as soon as they receive the first letter about a sanction. However, the two counties visited varied in their sanction rates, with Somerset having the highest sanction rate in the state. The caseworkers in counties visited in California also viewed sanctions as a "last resort." In Nevada County, caseworkers take an individualized approach to determining good cause, and a social worker follows-up with sanctioned clients through home visits or telephone calls. In Tehama County, sanctions serve as a way to "get the client's attention" about the importance of compliance. It was noted that about three-quarters of clients who are sanctioned will come into compliance and cure the sanction (e.g., stop the sanctioning process) within a month. Tehama county has started to conduct home visits to clients who are not complying. Imperial County staff are also resistant to sanctioning clients and indicate that sanctions tend to be lifted quickly. They have found that most sanctions are due to clients failing to attend orientation and hope that their plans to outstation these activities in several locations in the service area will improve attendance and reduce the incidence of sanctions.

Transitional benefits. Transitional benefits are those benefits which a client can continue to receive after they are no longer eligible for TANF cash assistance, either because their earnings place them above the income eligibility limit or because they have reached their time limits for receiving cash assistance. Transitional benefits include Medicaid and subsidies for child care, transportation, or supportive services required for work, such as uniforms, eyeglasses, or tools. Transitional assistance is particularly important in states that have a low-income eligibility limit for cash assistance, such as Alabama and Arkansas, because clients who are earning enough to lose cash assistance benefits may still have extremely low incomes. In contrast, respondents in Imperial County, California reported that very few clients leave assistance due to earnings because eligibility levels are so high. This was not the case in other California counties where the economy was somewhat better and wages were higher.

States determine policies, within PRWORA guidelines, regarding the type and duration of transitional assistance benefits. The administration of transitional benefits, and the ease of accessing such benefits, is also important. In Arkansas, no separate application is required for transitional benefits, making the process fairly seamless when a client moves off of cash assistance. Transitional Medicaid and child care benefits are simply "keyed into the system" using a different code than that used for TANF cash assistance clients. This process of initiating transitional benefits was similar in the three Arkansas counties we studied. In Barbour County, Alabama, when a client finds employment, the caseworker sends a congratulatory letter informing the client about transitional benefits, but the client must contact the caseworker to obtain these benefits. In Madera County, California, when a client is employed, her/his case is transferred to a transitional worker who follows the case and arranges for transitional benefits. In both Maine counties we visited, transitional assistance is arranged for the client by the TANF case aide or the eligibility worker.

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Asset limits. Under PRWORA, states have the flexibility to set their own asset rules for TANF eligibility. Of the states in our study, only California maintained the vehicle limit for TANF at the same value as that required by the Food Stamp Program, $4,650. The other states exempted one vehicle up to $10,000 for TANF eligibility. However, all states were subject to the $4,650 vehicle limit for food stamp eligibility for non-TANF food stamp applicants.[10] One-third of the sites in our study specifically mentioned asset limits as a problem due the need to own a car in rural areas. In Desha County, Arkansas, respondents estimate that 30 to 40 percent of food stamp clients have cars and that about three food stamp cases per month (less than 5 percent of the food stamp caseload) are denied for cars that are too valuable. In Pike County, Arkansas an estimated 20 percent of food stamp applicants are denied benefits due to exceeding the asset limit. The problem of asset limits was of special concern when we visited Conway County, Arkansas; two factories had recently closed, and workers who had lost their jobs could not get food stamps because they owned cars. In Imperial County, caseworkers reported that the vehicle limit "comes up daily" and that a number of applicants are disqualified from TANF or food stamps as a result of owning cars that are valued above the asset limit.

Diversion. Diversion assistance payments are offered to families who are eligible for TANF with the intent of providing assistance for families with short-term needs. Of the states in our study, Alabama has no provision for diversion assistance, Arkansas and Maine offer diversion assistance, and diversion assistance is a county option in California. In sites that offered diversion assistance, respondents indicated that it was used infrequently. The most common use of diversion assistance was for car repairs.

Relocation. Given the poor local economies and limited accessibility to better jobs, relocation might be a viable option to present to TANF clients in the study communities. In fact, seven of the twelve counties in our study indicated that they do provide financial assistance for relocation, generally if the client is relocating for a job. However, this is a little-used provision. While the option is discussed in these counties, caseworkers report that most clients are "not interested," citing their unwillingness to leave family and friends and the higher cost of living in communities that offer more job opportunities.

IV. Solutions, Promising Practices, and Innovations

Across the sites in this study we found a range of solutions or promising practices to address welfare reform implementation challenges. Some of the challenges and solutions are unique to rural areas, but other practices offer lessons for any poor or economically underdeveloped community. This section describes approaches in the areas of education and training, transportation and accessibility, supportive services, and community involvement.

[10] New Food Stamp Program regulations, approved in November 2000, exempt all cars with an equity value less than $1500 and, for cars above this value, exempt one car per adult in the household plus any car used by a teenager to drive to work or to school.

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Education and Training

Especially in areas where many clients have not completed high school and job opportunities are limited, local welfare agencies encourage basic education and skills development activities. Two states in our study have statewide programs that support education for TANF recipients; local sites in these states noted that some of their clients used these benefits. In California, the CalLearn program provides full benefits to high school age mothers if they stay in school. In Maine, the Parents as Scholars (PaS) program allows TANF-eligible individuals to attend classes as part of a two-year or four-year post-secondary program and still receive TANF benefits. This program is state-funded program and therefore does not count toward the five-year time limit. Respondents in Somerset County, Maine estimated that about 10 percent of their clients participate in PaS.

Local colleges, community colleges, and technical colleges are another resource used by the welfare agencies we visited. In Nevada County, California, Sierra College runs the "12 Bridges Program" that offers technical, computer, warehousing, and electrical soldering training programs; the Regional Occupational Training Program (ROP), operated by local school districts, provides medical assistant and TV production training programs. With urging from the Department of Social Services, Imperial Valley College in El Centro, California now provides skills and career assessments for CalWORKS clients and has adapted training programs to the needs of CalWORKS recipients. The welfare office in Desha County, Arkansas is collaborating with the Great Rivers Vocational Technical School to implement WAGE, a program that provides basic skills training according to a set of skills identified by employers; job applicants with a WAGE completion certificate are given priority by participating employers. The welfare office in Desha also contracts with Great Rivers Vocational Technical School to provide life skills training for welfare clients.

The communities visited have used the flexibility of TANF Block Grant funds to tailor programs to the educational and training needs of their participants. For example, Imperial County, with over half of its caseload monolingual Spanish-speaking, has placed a strong emphasis on English immersion classes. They have funded programs provided by San Diego State University's Calexico campus and by a local non-profit organization affiliated with the Regional Occupational Program. These programs combine six months of intensive instruction in English with occupational skills training in areas such as child care, Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), truck driver, clerical, and food technology. The English immersion classes count as work participation because, as one respondent commented, "offering skills training when there is a lack of English is like providing cars with no wheels."

The Desha County, Arkansas welfare office has worked with a local foundation in Pine Bluff, the Good Faith Fund, to enroll clients in CNA training and assist with the participants' transportation. The arrangement includes assistance with car purchase for clients who are placed in jobs. Funds are provided by the welfare agency, the local welfare coalition, and the Good Faith Fund. The welfare agency in Lowndes County, Alabama has an arrangement with a temporary staffing agency to train and place TANF clients and provide some ongoing support for employed clients. In Somerset County, Maine, welfare officials and other community leaders focused on the need to improve the skill base of entry-level workers. Their approach was to form

an employer advisory board to examine local employment possibilities for TANF recipients. The board includes representatives of technical schools, adult education, and the Chamber of Commerce.

Transportation and Accessibility

Most of the communities we visited were actively trying to address transportation challenges and improve access to services for welfare recipients. Although the combination of long distances, sparsely populated areas, and generally poor communities with limited local funds for infrastructure investment narrowed the options available to these communities, we did identify some creative and promising initiatives. A well-timed collaboration in Conway County, Arkansas created a "win-win" situation. The local hospital had a grant from the State Department of Transportation for transporting elderly and low-income clients to medical appointments. When the state's Medicaid program contracted with another organization to transport Medicaid clients, the hospital was in danger of losing its grant because of low utilization. The county welfare agency made arrangements with the hospital to use the hospital van and driver to transport welfare clients to training, work, and/or child care. This helped the hospital to meet its requirement under the grant to use the van to transport low-income people. The local welfare coalition paid part of the salary and fringe benefits of the van driver. Thus, the collaboration enabled the hospital to keep its grant, continue to transport its Medicaid clients, and preserve the van driver's job—all while helping to address the transportation needs of welfare clients.

There are two county-operated local bus systems in Tehama County, California, and CalWORKS provides bus passes for recipients. However, even with some public transportation, routes are limited and many clients must rely on their own transportation. CalWORKS also reimburses clients for mileage and, through the local Community Action Agency, CalWORKS recipients can get loans for car repairs, licensing/registration, and car purchase. In Somerset County, Maine, there is no public transportation and the average travel time to the welfare office is 30 minutes. A county program, "Good Wheels to Work" is currently helping about 10 families to obtain and maintain automobiles. In collaboration with Goodwill Industries, the program provides short-term loans for automobile purchase or repairs.

Another response to transportation issues in rural communities has been to improve access to welfare offices by offering extended hours or satellite service locations. The welfare office in Conway County, Arkansas is open from 7:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. in order to accommodate clients with long commutes to work. This change in hours required state approval. Imperial County, California, which covers a large geographic area (spanning 150 miles at points), has tried to improve access by establishing outstations in the community that are co-located with community partners. CalWORKS has outstations in three Family Resource Centers and, at the time of our visit, was considering opening satellite offices in three additional locations in the county. A CalWORKS eligibility worker is located at each of the outstations and has computer access to the CalWORKS system.

Supportive Services

Another area in which there is local variation and flexibility is in TANF payments for supportive services, which are broadly defined as services necessary for the client to work. All of the local

welfare agencies we visited use supportive services funds to assist with car repairs, but specific policies vary. In Barbour County, Alabama assistance for car repairs is limited to 10 percent of the car's value. Other needs that are most commonly addressed with supportive services funds include drivers' license fees, auto insurance, and clothing for work. Imperial County, California provides supportive services valued up to $450 per year to assist welfare clients in obtaining and retaining employment. In Conway County, Arkansas, supportive services funds have even been used to purchase washing machines for clients to enable them to launder uniforms required for work.

In addition to using welfare agency funds flexibly, local sites were able to leverage other funds and in-kind community support to assist welfare clients. In Desha County, Arkansas, contributions from the business community and individuals support a single-parent scholarship fund that offers up to $500 per semester for single mothers and fathers to help them further their education. Community members in Sumter County, Alabama are working to set up a resource center that houses GED classes, a food pantry, and a clothing bank. Welfare agency staff in Sumter have contacted students at the University of West Alabama about volunteering as mentors and as transportation providers. The Family Coaches Program in Barbour County, Alabama is a collaboration between the county welfare agency and a Montgomery, Alabama television station that recruits mentors from the community to provide support and encouragement to TANF clients. The welfare agency in Imperial County, California has agreements with WalMart and an area clothing store to allow clients to purchase one or two new outfits when they start work.

Community Involvement

Implementing welfare reform and supporting low-income workers was a community effort in many of the sites visited. Although community capacity varied in the Arkansas sites, the state's support of local coalitions (called TEA coalitions for Transitional Employment Assistance, the name of Arkansas's TANF program) helped to motivate and organize local community resources. For example, in Desha County, the TEA coalition is planning initiatives in transportation, job training, child care, and teen pregnancy prevention. The TEA coalition includes representatives of the Housing Authority, Head Start, other child care providers, vocational-technical schools, adult education, the local health center, and local banks and businesses.

Similarly, the counties we visited in California described substantial community involvement in welfare reform implementation. In Nevada County, the Welfare Reform Steering Committee helped to plan CalWORKS implementation and held forums with the business community. The Steering Committee included the former DSS Director, the local United Way chapter, city and county officials, local nonprofit organizations, the chamber of commerce, and the school superintendent. United Way recently conducted a county needs assessment to assist in future planning. Tehama County, California has a welfare administrative oversight team that started two initiatives. The first was the addition of a staff person in the local welfare agency to help those who need to apply for SSI or need assistance with SSI-related appeals. The second was a loan program, administered by the local Community Action Agency, to assist clients with transportation-related costs. Because CalWORKS includes a school attendance requirement, welfare agency staff in Imperial County, California serve on school attendance review boards.

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This arrangement grew out of a series of community meetings that were held to plan for welfare reform implementation.

Economic development is another focus of community involvement that included welfare agency staff in a number of sites. A representative of the welfare agency in Desha County, Arkansas, works with Leadership Desha, a private nonprofit group that was formed to examine the viability of micro-enterprise in Desha County. Leadership Desha is examining resources available for clients interested in starting their own businesses. The welfare agency director in Imperial County, California, is also actively involved in local economic development activities in order to prepare recipients for potential jobs associated with these efforts. For example, the county is exploring bringing in trash dumps, mental health facilities for sexual offenders, and a toxic waste dump to spur the economy. A new port of entry is under development on the border with Mexico—the Gateway to Americas project is developing storage for goods entering the United States. The welfare agency director participates in meetings that address these initiatives.

V. Conclusions and Policy Implications

In two other papers prepared as part of our study, the authors found that work incentives are somewhat greater in rural areas than urban areas, that single mothers are more likely to work in rural areas, and that welfare reform has had as much of an effect in rural areas as urban areas. In this paper, the findings from the field tell a story that is consistent with the results of the two earlier papers. The sites we visited were generally positive about the work focus of welfare reform. Both our quantitative analyses and our site visits confirm a strong work ethic in rural communities; however, our site visits also captured an appreciation among service providers of the economic difficulties in rural areas that limit job opportunities and earning potential. Poverty and low paying jobs are common in rural areas and are not unique to those on public assistance. Communities tend to support the belief that everyone who can work should work, but also have a degree of compassion for the poor, since the shared experience in poor rural communities is that "we all struggle to make a living."

Many of the challenges faced by residents of rural poor areas–low-wage jobs, limited economic development, and low education levels–are similar to those faced by individuals living in other areas that have been bypassed by our nation's recent economic prosperity. But some barriers are greater in rural areas, such as limited transportation, economic development, and availability of employment and training services. Certain problems we expected to find in rural areas, such as lack of child care and limited supportive services, were not as severe as anticipated. We found that state policies were an important factor in determining the availability and location of services (e.g., funding of public transportation, state-funded general assistance, location of welfare and employment service offices). State policies may affect service availability and access to a greater extent in rural areas, with their more dispersed populations and limited local resources, than in urban or suburban areas.

TANF and Food Stamp Policy Implications

To date, welfare reform has apparently exerted similar impacts in rural areas as in the rest of the country—fewer families are on welfare and more welfare recipients are working. The positive

attitude, resourcefulness, and resilience of the rural communities we visited are the most notable aspects of welfare reform implementation we observed. The flexibility of local caseworkers and other service providers in making alliances and adjusting to their conditions reflects the smaller caseloads and more close-knit communities found in rural areas. While not unique to rural settings, based on our extensive field experience, we find that such characteristics are more often encountered in rural and small communities.

Individuals who are working are better off than when they were on welfare, but it is still too soon to gauge long-term effects. Many respondents expressed concern about how clients would manage after transitional benefits ran out. In rural areas, there are few opportunities for individuals to advance beyond the income and benefits available in the entry-level jobs they have obtained. Longer-term, systemic solutions, including economic development and transportation to more distant employment centers, will be required. TANF policies offered some benefits for rural areas. TANF strengthened the general support for work that exists in rural communities; the TANF Block Grant permitted flexibility in the use of funds, which enabled rural communities to tailor services to their unique circumstances; and TANF stimulated employer and community support for welfare recipients. Some TANF policies that we expected to be more popular in rural locations, such as relocation, were not used to any great extent. Many communities noted that the proximity of family and friends provided not only emotional support, but in-kind support such as child care, meals, and housing, as well. With regard to Food Stamp policies, the asset limit on vehicles was an important issue in many of the communities visited, where the only route to a better job required reliable personal transportation. The work requirement waiver for able-bodied adults in areas of high unemployment offered short-term relief, but removed incentives to improve the employability of these individuals.

There is an important distinction to be made, however, between the assistance and compassion that individual caseworkers and welfare administrators can offer to rural welfare recipients and the removal of systemic barriers to economic self-sufficiency that are beyond the control of the welfare office. Structural features of rural economies, including: the ability to attract new investments; the difficulty in achieving economies of scale in delivering social services, education, and training; and the significant numbers of working poor, result in an underdeveloped infrastructure of support for employment in rural areas (Tickamyer et al. 2000).

Rural communities need greater support of education and economic development activities to expand employment opportunities. Improving education goes hand-in-hand with economic development, and policies should address both individual and community needs. For example, policies that permit certain education activities to "count" as work participation benefit the individual; if such policies result in a better educated workforce, they will benefit economic development as well. Increased flexibility in the use of funds can help rural communities to stimulate economic development.

Policy Research Implications

Our study supports the conclusion that we need to look beneath the surface of the standard metro-non-metro definition to better understand communities that are most at-risk when new policies are implemented. The county-based metro and non-metro definitions are inadequate, especially in the western United States, where large counties hide complex population and

settlement patterns. Furthermore, our site visits indicated that county-level data, such as unemployment rates and primary industries, may not accurately reflect the populations of interest for welfare and social assistance policies. Researchers have been exploring other methods for developing useful classification schemes. For example, in a study of rural and agricultural California counties, Brady, Sprague, and Gey (2000) focused on economic and demographic characteristics. Using data on percent rural population, population density, unemployment rates, and percent farm and agricultural services employment, they used factor analysis, cluster analysis, and other data reduction techniques to identify groups of counties with similar characteristics. The type of thinking they demonstrated could be expanded to develop groupings of measures that address a combination of remoteness and economic challenges in order to identify those places that have been bypassed by economic prosperity. This approach could help improve the targeting of resources—not only the amount of resources, but the types of resources as well—to focus on systemic improvements as well as individual benefits. The current availability of funds and added flexibility under TANF and WtW may provide the means to implement this approach.

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Appendix: Site Profiles

BARBOUR COUNTY, ALABAMA

Location and Setting
Barbour County is adjacent to the Columbus, Georgia, metropolitan area and has a population of approximately 27,000 people. There are two main population and service centers in the county, Clayton and Eufala. A number of county services have two locations, including health care and courthouses. The Department of Human Resources (DHR) office, which administers the TANF program, is located in Clayton. Eufaula, located 25 miles away from Clayton, is a larger town. Most of the TANF population is located in the Eufala area, which has a population of 16,000. DHR has a satellite office in Eufala. There are a few other smaller towns scattered throughout the county.

Local Economy/Employment
The local unemployment rate is under 4 percent. Clients stay within the county and state to work, because there are plenty of jobs in Barbour County. Major employers include a chicken processing plant (just opened 3 years ago), and factories producing beverages, wood products, plastics, carpeting, and fish products/bait. Many factories will hire people without a GED or high school diploma, but the jobs that pay over $7 per hour usually require a GED or high school diploma. Most clients start work at $5.75-7.00 per hour.

Because of the large size of the county, people drive 50 or more miles per day for employment. For instance, because most of the better-paying jobs are in Eufaula, people who live in Clayton will drive the 25 miles each way, daily.

Barriers to Employment/ Service Needs
Common barriers to employment for TANF clients include mental health and substance abuse problems, domestic violence issues, teenage dropouts, and sexual abuse. The most noted service gaps are transportation and low-income child care, which has a waiting list.

Community Response to Welfare Reform
The community has been supportive and excited about welfare reform, primarily because clients are encouraged/required to go to work and benefits are time-limited.

SUMTER COUNTY, ALABAMA

Location and Setting
Sumter County is located in southwestern Alabama, approximately 35 miles northeast of Meridian, Mississippi, and has a population of about 15,700. Major cities in this county are Livingston and York. The Department of Human Resources (DHR) office is located in York. Smaller local communities include Cuba, Gainesville, Epes, and Emelle.

Local Economy/Employment
Major sources of employment in the local area include the pulpwood industry (both in forestry and in the factories that make paper products out of pulpwood); a chemical waste dump in Emelle; a clothing factory in York; the local school system; the University of West Alabama; catfish and chicken processing plants; and the Department of Human Resources. Livingston was designated an Enterprise Zone in 1994, which has brought in additional funding for the area and led to a boom of building near the interstate highway. This increased development has provided some service sector jobs to TANF clients. A small number of clients have found employment in more distant areas. These include Forrest, Mississippi (2 hours away); Hale County, Alabama; Tuscaloosa, Alabama; and a tire and wheel plant about 15 miles from Livingston. Clients generally get entry-level jobs that pay minimum wage ($5.75 per hour) in fast food, retail, and other service jobs. A few factories have closed recently.

Barriers to Employment/ Service Needs
Welfare agency staff indicated that the majority of those remaining on the TANF rolls are "hard to serve," with multiple barriers, especially low education, lack of work experience, and low motivation. Education is a significant barrier to employment in this county. Even those individuals who graduate from high school are functioning at very low levels. Those who receive a GED typically function at about an 8th grade level.

Child care and transportation also pose substantial barriers to employment. Because there is a lack of good jobs in the area, people travel up to 1.5 hours each way in order to secure employment that pays a "living wage."

Community Response to Welfare Reform
Employer response to welfare reform is varied. Some employers are not familiar with tax incentives available when hiring TANF recipients. Community service groups and churches have shown an interest in welfare reform and are working to set up a resource center. Subsidized housing providers prefer not to rent to TANF clients.

LOWNDES COUNTY, ALABAMA

Location and Setting
Loundes County is located in south-central Alabama, 25 miles southwest of Montgomery and 35 miles southeast of Selma. The county's population is 75 percent African American. The area is characterized by high unemployment, a high rate of poverty, and very limited industry in the county.

Local Economy/Employment
The agriculture industry is the largest local employer in the area. A lot of jobs in the construction field are available in this county. GE Plastics is a major local source of employment, but most of the jobs available at GE Plastics demand a higher skill level than is possessed by the average TANF participant. American Apparel is another local employer. A nursing home is opening in the county soon, and welfare agency staff hope that this will become a viable source of employment for clients who have received Certified Nurse Assistant (CNA) training.

A unique aspect of the local economy in Lowndes County is the almost complete lack of service industry jobs. The jobs most often secured by TANF participants are service-type jobs outside of Lowndes County (Montgomery was mentioned as a primary local source for this type of employment), seasonal employment in the agriculture industry, and positions in packaging and processing plants. Most of the jobs that clients find pay minimum wage or slightly higher.

Barriers to Employment/ Service Needs
Clients that the Department of Human Resources (DHR) work with have become noticeably harder to serve since TANF has been implemented. According to welfare agency staff, some of the barriers that make individuals harder-to-serve include behavioral problems, low educational level, poor or no work history, and a lack of the motivation needed to succeed in the workplace. Overall availability of services appears to be very good as long as the individual seeking services is willing to travel out of the county (often to Montgomery or Greenville, Mississippi) to receive these services.

Community Response to Welfare Reform
The absence of local jobs available to TANF recipients makes the work-emphasis of welfare reform a "tough sell" in this area. This county was the least developed economically of all the counties visited in this study.

DESHA COUNTY, ARKANSAS

Location and Setting
Desha County, Arkansas, is located about 2 hours south-southwest of Memphis, Tennessee, in the Mississippi Delta region of Arkansas. McGeehee, the location of Department of Human Services (DHS) office, is the second-largest town in Desha County, with Dumas being larger (4,000 residents compared to 5,500). The office in McGehee is the only welfare office for the county.

Local Economy/Employment
The Mississippi Delta region is primarily a farm economy. The main crops are cotton, soybeans, and rice. However, agriculture is not a major source of employment for TANF clients. Primary employment centers in the local area are in Monticello and Dumas, which are about 30 and 10 miles from McGehee, respectively. About 40 percent of the population lives in Dumas, 40 percent in McGehee, and 20 percent in other areas. Residents commute within a 50-mile radius for jobs, with some going as far as Pine Bluff and Greenville, Mississippi. The jobs most available to those transitioning off welfare are food service positions, factory or assembly-line work, and Certified Nurse Aide (CNA) positions. Industries in the area include garment/apparel, paper mill, animal feed, spark plug manufacturing, trailer hook-up manufacturing, rice mills (seasonal), coolants/refrigeration, and the wine industry. Regardless of the job, clients generally start at minimum wage (CNAs start slightly higher, at $6 per hour).

McGehee was once a fairly prosperous small town with a Union Pacific Railroad maintenance yard. The relocation of the maintenance yard to Monticello (30 miles to the west in Drew County) 15 or 20 years ago was a devastating blow to the local economy, and was followed by other plant closings and layoffs; the area has been trying to recover ever since. There have been some efforts to attract industry to McGehee and to encourage microenterprise, but these endeavors have had little impact so far.

Barriers to Employment/ Service Needs
Challenges noted by respondents were transportation and the poorly educated workforce. There is no public transportation, which is a common situation in rural areas, but there is almost no organized van pool transportation either. In addition, access to private automobiles for TANF clients is very limited. Poor education exacerbates the transportation problem because low literacy prevents many clients from obtaining drivers' licenses. The area needs to attract new industries/employers, but is having trouble doing so because the workforce is so poorly educated. Solutions that are being developed include automobile purchase programs and a greater emphasis on training and skills development, in combination with activities that fulfill work requirements.

In general, welfare caseworkers think that most needed services are available; referrals are routinely made to services as far as 20 miles away.

Community Response to Welfare Reform
Local providers and employers participate in a welfare coalition that is planning initiatives in transportation, job training, child care, and teen pregnancy. Employers are hesitant about hiring welfare recipients without a GED because they know the inadequacies of the public school system.

CONWAY COUNTY, ARKANSAS

Location and Setting
Conway County is adjacent to the Little Rock metropolitan area, located approximately one hour northwest of Little Rock. Morrilton is the main Department of Human Services (DHS) location for the county, but DHS can take applications in all parts of the county via telephone, home visits, "town hall" meetings, and dropping off applications at schools, post offices, grocery stores, etc. The racial breakdown of the county's caseload is about 70 percent white and 30 percent black.

Local Economy/Employment
The local economy recently suffered a major blow: the closing of two manufacturing plants, Arrow Automotive and Levi Strauss. A total of 800 people lost their jobs due to these plant closings. Clients who worked at Arrow or Levi's are having to take minimum wage jobs now. Many of the Levi's workers have literacy problems.

Despite the current surge in displaced workers, most respondents were "upbeat" about the area's economic future. Faulkner County's (adjacent to the southeast) economy is growing rapidly and offers a lot of technology jobs. The town of Russellville is also experiencing economic growth. Two major employers there are Tyson's Chicken and a nuclear power plant. Remaining major employers are Kraft (employs a few hundred people) and a fairly large paper mill on the outskirts of town (employs between 50 and 100 workers). Most manufacturing facilities employ fewer than 100 people. Other employers in Morrilton include the trucking industry and the state of Arkansas. Dairy and poultry farming are also major industries; these were the only agricultural industries that were mentioned. TANF clients in Conway County find employment in a number of different sectors, including horticultural work, nursing, working at/managing convenience stores, service industry work, factory work, and fill-in/extra help work. TANF clients generally start out earning minimum wage.

Barriers to Employment/ Service Needs
The greatest barriers to employment here are inadequate transportation, low levels of education, and lack of work experience and self-esteem. Many welfare clients have been or are victims of domestic violence. Alcohol or other drug problems are also common barriers to employment. Caseworkers also reported seeing a number of single father families. Teenage pregnancy is an issue of concern in the county. In general, TANF clients do not travel far for work because they do not have the resources necessary to own a dependable vehicle. Those who do travel do not go much farther than Conway to the east and Russellville to the west.

Community Response to Welfare Reform
Civic organizations provide a lot of help, although the loss of Levi corporate contributions (e.g., through the United Way drive) will be a blow to the community. The local public school system has a very strong reputation in the community. There is strong sense of community, and the welfare office is able to access and coordinate many resources for welfare clients.

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PIKE COUNTY, ARKANSAS

Location/Setting
Pike County is a non-adjacent rural county. The closest city is Hot Springs, which is 60 miles northeast of the Pike County seat of Murfreesboro. The other major town in Pike County is Glenwood. Glenwood is located in the northern part of the county, while Murfreesboro is located in the southern half of the county. Site visit respondents noted that one problem in Pike County is the divide between these two towns; there is a rivalry between them which prevents better intra-county cooperation.

Pike County's population is mostly white , but there has been a significant influx of Hispanics in the last few years because of work opportunities in the poultry processing industry. A pronounced racial divide exists within the county. The northern half of the county is predominantly white, while most of the African-American and Hispanic population resides in the southern part of the county. The overwhelming majority of the clients served by the Department of Human Services in Murfreesboro are white. Most of the clients served have a high school level education. There are a lot of multi-generational welfare recipients in this county.

The TANF caseload in this county is very small. In April 2000, only 12 people in the county were receiving TANF benefits, with only 2 of these individuals being time-limited cases subject to a work activity requirement. However, 732 individuals were receiving food stamps, and 949 individuals were receiving Medicaid at that time.

Local Economy/Employment
Clients can find jobs in the county in fast food restaurants, convenience stores, or supermarkets. Other major employers in the town of Murfreesboro include the state (DHS, school system) and a large chicken hatchery. If individuals can travel, they have several employment options outside of Murfreesboro, such as a glove factory, a blue jeans plant, and a lumber mill in Glenwood. Several chicken processing plants are also located in the area. Some of the residents in the northern part of the county find employment in Hot Springs; most of these jobs are service-related. The town of Nashville, located 12 miles west of Murfreesboro in Howard County, is also a relatively major employment center.

Barriers to Employment/Service Needs
The greatest barriers to employment here are transportation, child care, and low education and/or skill levels. There is a need for additional odd-hours child care and care for children with special needs. There is a mismatch between where the people of Pike County live and where jobs are available. DHS has managed to use the diversion program to either purchase cars or pay for car-related expenses for a few clients, but the lack of any type of public transit system is a major problem.

Community Response to Welfare Reform
Local service industry employers, such as fast food restaurants and supermarkets, seem to be very willing to hire welfare recipients. Since the county's welfare caseload is very small, community activism around welfare reform has been limited.

IMPERIAL COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

Location/Setting
Imperial County is located in southern California on the Mexican border. It is adjacent to San Diego County, but, given the county's large geographic area (spanning 150 miles at points), very few people access San Diego's social services. The county's population is 141,000. El Centro, the county seat, has a population of 35–40,000 and is located about 120 miles from San Diego. The town of Calexico sits on the border of Mexicali, Mexico (population 1 million). The presence of the border impacts the county's commerce, as does NAFTA and a border trade alliance. Currently, a new port of entry is under development: the Gateway to Americas project.

Imperial County's population is 70 percent Hispanic, and 86 percent of TANF clients are Hispanic. Initial welfare rumors about non-citizens no longer being eligible for benefits were a serious concern because some of the caseload is residing in the United States legally but does not have citizenship status. Changes in programs affecting non-citizens affect the county's social services caseload and the local economy. The county's cash assistance caseload has dropped from 8,000 in 1992 to about 4,000 in 1999. Food Stamp caseloads have not seen a decline, and the medical assistance caseload has increased substantially.

Local Economy/Employment
Imperial County has the highest unemployment rate and lowest per capita income in the state. However, the county seems optimistic about economic development; several respondents noted that the county's official unemployment rate is probably higher than it actually is. The county is exploring bringing in trash dumps, mental health facilities for sexual offenders, and a toxic waste dump to spur the economy.

The county's primary industry is agriculture. The desert climate and irrigation permit year-round farming. The government is the second-largest employer (much of which is related to border operations). The county has two major state prisons. Most of the state prison employees came from out of the county, due to the high job qualification requirements, so the prisons did not provide the expected stimulus to the local labor market. The county also has a large migrant worker population. Although this does not affect cash assistance (because they apply for unemployment when their jobs end), when their unemployment benefits cease, migrant workers apply for state medical benefits and Food Stamps. Most jobs available for welfare recipients in the county pay less than $7 per hour. Much of the employment for welfare recipients is part-time, seasonal, and low-wage.

Barriers to Employment/ Service Needs
As the caseload decreases, an increasing proportion of it is Spanish-only speaking—in 1999, 53 percent of the TANF caseload was monolingual in Spanish. In addition to language, a major barrier to work is transportation for those who live in outlying or remote areas (of which there are several in Imperial County).

Community Response to Welfare Reform
The Department of Social Services is actively involved in the economic development efforts of the county. They were planning on attending an upcoming NAFTA show, and often solicit employers planning to locate in the county for jobs. Unfortunately, much of the economic development is occurring in places inaccessible to public transportation.

MADERA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

Location/Setting
Madera County is adjacent to the Fresno metropolitan area, located in the Central Valley of California, approximately 20 miles from the city of Fresno. Major population centers are Madera City and Chowchilla, both of which are located in the San Joaquin Valley. Most clients live in Madera City or close to it, but it was estimated that about 20 percent of the CalWORKS caseload live in Chowchilla (located north of Madera). Communities closer to or in the mountains are much smaller and more isolated. Some individuals choose to live in these more remote areas so that they will be "left alone" by the Department of Social Services (DSS) and government in general. DSS is actively trying to establish an out-station in one of these outlying areas.

As of March 2000, there were about 2,200 residents of Madera County enrolled in the CalWORKS program. About 1,600 of these individuals were participating in Welfare-to-Work activities. Most of the remainder of these clients were in an educational program (GED class, English as a second language, or basic education).

Local Economy/Employment
Agriculture is the major employer in the local area. There are also some service industry and produce packing plant jobs in the local area. Most of these jobs pay minimum wage or less. There is more industry in Fresno; a very small number of clients commute to Fresno for work on a daily basis. Several interviewees expressed concern over the local economy's reliance on agriculture because it does not provide year-round employment to many workers. A few major local employers have left the Madera area in the last few years; no large employers have come in to replace them.

Barriers to Employment/ Service Needs
Major barriers to work faced by clients in this area include low educational levels, severe depression, and alcohol or other drug addiction. Multigenerational receipt of public benefits and teen pregnancy are additional problems.

The limited availability of low-cost housing is a concern in this community. About half of CalWORKS recipients were living in public housing at the time of our visit. Transportation is also inadequate. There is a private bus service that serves Madera City and the areas immediately surrounding it, and a city bus system which runs within the city of Madera, but expanded hours and an expanded service are needed. Transportation to the agricultural fields is provided by the farm managers. There are no regulations regarding the safety of these vans or their drivers.

Community Response to Welfare Reform
Local service providers work well together and local residents are very supportive of the goals of CalWORKS. Local employers have been willing to hire CalWORKS recipients.

NEVADA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

Location/Setting
Nevada County is located in northern California at the western base of the Sierra Nevadas, about 60 miles northeast of Sacramento, 60 miles west of Lake Tahoe, and 90 miles west of Reno, Nevada. Its three main cities are Nevada City, Truckee, and Grass Valley.

As of October 1999, the size of Nevada County's CalWORKS caseload was about 600 cases. The caseload is predominantly white, though there is a large Hispanic population in Truckee (in the eastern part of the county). The overall caseload has halved since welfare reform. Some clients live in an isolated city called North San Juan, known locally as "The Ridge." This area has a counter-culture reputation; it is reported that drug use is prevalent and that residents of this area eschew government intervention.

Nevada County has become a popular retirement destination for affluent retirees from the San Francisco Bay and Los Angeles areas. About 75 percent of the county's population has moved here in the past 20 years. This recent influx has inflated the housing market and the cost of living in the county.

Local Economy/Employment
Unemployment in Nevada County is low (around 4 percent—the lowest they have had in years), but many people are working in low-wage jobs. The employer base was characterized as "stagnant." The county itself is the largest employer. The county is also the location of an electronics firm that fluctuates in the number of jobs it provides. The timber and tourist industries provide seasonal employment. The ski-related jobs in Truckee pay $6 to $8 per hour, as do the many restaurant jobs in Nevada City and Grass Valley. Many jobs are available in Roseville and Rocklin, closer to Sacramento, that offer double the wages of jobs in Nevada County; however, residents don't want to commute or live there. Nevada County is seen as a very desirable place to live.

Barriers to Employment/Service Needs
The most frequently noted barriers to employment include mental health issues, substance abuse problems, and domestic violence. Other problems are intergenerational welfare receipt and lack of work ethic.

Nevada County has the highest housing cost of any rural county in the state. In addition, homeowners are fixing up older homes that a welfare recipient might have afforded and converting them into more expensive apartments. As a result, some clients live in alternative housing that is not up to code—recreational vehicles, pickups with campers, tents, lean-tos, etc.

The county operates bus routes that extend to the county limits. Transportation in the county is generally considered good, but there are no links to the outlying areas (Sacramento and Roseville) that have better-paying jobs.

Community Response to Welfare Reform
The political climate in Nevada County is "not welcoming" to low-income individuals. There are debates about whether and how the county will grow in the future, especially concerning whether housing will be affordable for middle- and working-class families or whether the growth policies will price those families out of the market.

TEHAMA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

Location/Setting
Tehama County is a rural adjacent county with a population of about 50,000. The metropolitan areas adjacent to Tehama are Redding to the north and Chico to the southeast. Most of the population in this county lives along the Interstate 5 corridor in the towns of Red Bluff and Corning.

The Department of Social Services (DSS) office visited for this study is located in Red Bluff; another office opened fairly recently in Corning. The population served by the Red Bluff office is mostly white, and about 10 to 13 percent of the caseload is Hispanic. The office does have several bilingual staff members that work with Spanish-speaking clients.

Local Economy/Employment
The local unemployment rate, about 5 or 6 percent, is the lowest it has been in 25 years. Areas of employment that are accessible to the welfare population include clerical work, fast food restaurants, hotel cleaning, a limited number of mill jobs, jobs with the county health center, field work, and government jobs. The local economy is heavily dependent on agriculture. The maximum wage for an unskilled field worker is about $6 per hour. For the last six months of 1999, average starting salaries for CalWORKs recipients who secured employment was $6.75 per hour. Most of these jobs represent a good starting point; the problem is that most of them offer little opportunity for advancement .

Several years ago, Wal-Mart opened a distribution center south of Red Bluff just off I-5. This is now one of the county's largest employers, with average wages in the $10 to $12 range. The timber industry was a major employer until recently; cutbacks in the timber industry have led to a downsizing of the local timber workforce.

Barriers to Employment/Service Needs
Recipients who remain on the caseload, as well as new recipients, are increasingly difficult to serve because of the barriers they face. The most common barriers that hard-to-serve clients face are substance abuse problems, a lack of basic skills, and an inability to make proper decisions and set goals.

The supply of child care in the county needs to be expanded, especially in terms of night care, weekend care, and care of children who are 3 years old or younger. Currently, there is a waiting list for all subsidized child care (CalWORKs and low-income child care).

Transportation is considered a major barrier in Tehama County, although a county-run transportation system runs up and down the I-5 corridor, in and around Red Bluff, and along another highway.

Community Response to Welfare Reform
Coordination between local social service agencies has been excellent. Welfare reform has increased the amount of collaboration. The relatively small size of the community facilitates the translation of ideas into action.

OXFORD COUNTY, MAINE

Location/Setting
Oxford County is a non-metropolitan county that is adjacent to two metropolitan counties—Androscoggin (where the Lewiston-Auburn metro area is located) and Cumberland (the county where the Portland metro area is located). It is about 120 miles from the southernmost end of the county to the Canadian border.

As of our visit, there was no Department of Human Services (DHS) office located in Oxford County. The county was served by an office located in Lewiston that provides services to the "tri-county area," which includes Androscoggin, Franklin, and Oxford Counties.

The official county seat of Oxford County is South Paris. However, all of the local service providers we interviewed were located in or near the town of Rumford. South Paris is about 20 miles northwest of Lewiston, while Rumford is 45 miles north of Lewiston. Other towns in Oxford County are Norway, Fryeburg, and Mexico.

Local Economy/Employment
The paper mill in Rumford is a major source of employment. Recently, this plant has been decreasing the size of its workforce. Some new industry has moved into Oxford County in recent years. New England Public Warehouse just opened a branch in Oxford County. The majority of the jobs found by TANF clients are part-time, minimum-wage jobs in the service sector. A small number of clients have been able to receive training and find employment in better-paying jobs, such as Certified Nurse Aide (CNA).

This area also has a lot of seasonal employment due to the presence of a ski area in the town of Bethel. The jobs available to clients at this location require very little in the way of skills and pay minimum wage. It was also noted that a lot of clients in Oxford County are self-employed. A major self-employment field in this county has been the timber industry.

Barriers to Employment/Service Needs
Among the major barriers to employment for TANF clients from Oxford County are transportation, low educational levels, problems with self-esteem, and problems with depression. Clients with multiple barriers are referred to services in Lewiston and Rumford.

Caseworkers frequently grant exemptions from the TANF work program due to transportation and/or child care problems. There is a shortage in the amount of infant care and odd hours child care that is available.

Community Response to Welfare Reform
Employers have been very receptive to the possibility of hiring welfare recipients, due to the tight labor market. The community response to welfare reform has been very positive.

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SOMERSET COUNTY, MAINE

Location/Setting
Somerset County is a non-adjacent, rural county, located in the western part of the state. The Department of Human Services (DHS) office for the county is located in Skowhegan, the county seat. It is about 100 miles from Skowhegan (population 7,000), at the far southeast end of the county, to Jackman, located at the far northwest edge of the county. Skowhegan is located approximately an hour north of Augusta, the state capital. Few services are available in the northern sections of the county.

The TANF caseload for Somerset County is about 5,000. Somerset County has the highest per capita rate of food stamp receipt in the state of Maine. There is not much racial diversity in this county. There is a small but substantial French-speaking population near Jackman (15 miles south of the Canadian border).

Local Economy/Employment
Somerset County has been one of the poorest counties in Maine for a long time. The area was labeled the "northern tip of Appalachia" by one worker. However, the past few years have been relatively good ones for the local economy. The county is historically characterized by seasonal employment (logging, farming, recreation, wreath-making) and factories specializing in leather and paper products. The three main employment centers are Skowhegan, Waterville, and Augusta. Major local employers include two paper mills, a Chinet factory, a tannery, four large shoe companies, and the service sector. The service economy in this area is growing rapidly. Two Dexter Shoe factories downsized this past summer; fortunately, two other shoe companies hired most of the workers displaced by Dexter.

If clients have at least some skill base they are generally able to get non–service industry jobs. The majority of clients find work as general laborers in mills or factories. Clients who are placed in employment generally earn between $5.15 and $6.50 per hour. Approximately half of the jobs that clients are placed in offer the opportunity for promotions. Many clients find seasonal work either work in forestry-related fields or serving tourists who come to this region in the summer months.

Barriers to Employment/Service Needs
Many clients have no marketable skills and therefore are limited to service jobs. Another barrier faced by clients is a lack of the "soft" skills required to retain a job. Some of the areas in which clients have problems include interacting professionally with other workers and/or bosses, "attitudinal" issues, and time management. Transportation is consistently mentioned as the biggest problem clients face in keeping a job. Since no mass transit is available, clients must rely on cars. There is also a shortage in the amount of odd-hours child care that is available. This is a particular problem, since a great deal of available employment is shift work.

Respondents reported that Somerset County is among the highest in the nation in rates of spousal, child, sex, and substance abuse. This was attributed in part to the fact that the county is characterized by a very homogenous population dominated by patriarchal family structures. Additionally, some felt that the remoteness of the area (homes are spread far apart from one other) sometimes makes it easier to hide these types of problems.

Community Response to Welfare Reform
Local employers are in favor of welfare reform. An employer advisory board has been formed to examine the local employment possibilities of TANF recipients. This board consists of representatives from local businesses, technical schools, and providers of adult education.